REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF SUMMER
Mark 6:30-36
September 1, 1974

This is a ~~salient~~ pregnant occasion. Preachers spend a lot of time considering what they will say in a first sermon in a new pulpit. This preacher is no exception. From the moment you elected me to be your pastor on June 2, I have been conscious of the fact that on September 1 I would be here and you would be here listening, wondering, expecting - - - - It is indeed, a ~~salient~~ pregnant occasion.

And yet, regardless of the importance this day has for me -- and for the congregation of this Church, the over-riding reality with which you and I must come to grips is that it is Labor Day Weekend. My experience over the years has taught me that a lot of otherwise faithful church members don't attend on Labor Day Weekend, and that many of those who do harbor wistful thoughts about golf courses, tennis courts, picnics and sail boats -- which is to say that this is not the day to deliver myself of a weighty ~~document~~ oration on the Reformed Doctrine of the Atonement.

The reality of the day is that life in the United States and in this community is about to undergo a radical change. Upheaval might be a more accurate term. It happens every year on this weekend, as summer disintegrates into autumn, ~~the weather notwithstanding~~. We observe an annual rite of beginning and ending on January 1, but even the most casual observer of our culture knows that the only thing that changes on that occasion is the calendar. The real divide happens now. Life begins this week with a vengeance. Organizations that have been dormant for three months will reorganize. Committees that have limped through the summer will begin with a new lease on life. Vacationing friends will be reunited. Colleges and universities will spring into action. New automobiles will be revealed soon. And if you have a touch of masochist in you, you can celebrate the resumption of life by sitting through a whole smorgasboard of new television shows.

The dimensions of the change that is upon us can be documented in the life style of any Junior ~~and~~ or Senior High School student. Last week the major problem to be solved was how to fill the hours with meaningful activity. Before this week is out, however, the problem will have reversed itself -- how to do all one wants to do and still have time to eat and sleep?

In any case, we've got one foot on a very particular and peculiarly American Merry-go-round this morning. And most of us won't be getting off -- or slowing down until sometime next May. And it seemed appropriate to me, regardless of the other significance of this day, to think about that very seriously, and very critically.

Early in his ministry Jesus sent his twelve friends out on what might be called a field trip in discipleship. Their instructions were to go into the villages of Galilee, two by two, teaching, preaching and healing. The success of their venture is suggested by the footnote in Mark's Gospel which indicates that King Herod thought John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, had returned to life. The disciples ~~They~~ returned to Jesus, we must assume, flushed with success, but drained - physically and emotionally. And the first thing he said to them was, "Come away by yourselves, to a lonely place, and rest a while." Mark adds paranthetically, "For they had no leisure to eat, so many were coming and going" -- which sounds a lot like what happens in our home around dinner time.

Jesus -- always sensitive to the people around him -- realized that his disciples needed rest, peace and quiet, a time to be alone with themselves and with him; an opportunity to think quietly about what had happened, to sort out their feelings and experiences. It was his prescription for them -- and I would submit that he might have a similar prescription for us -- on this day in particular.

We need the kind of experiences that our life-style conspires to disallow. We need -- each of us -- a lonely place to rest a while: a time to reflect and to think: an opportunity to become acquainted with ourselves again.

Great men have always known that. Jesus retreated on occasion, to be alone and to pray. The Bible is full of stories of people who regularly punctuated heroic and turmoiled lives with periods of solitude and reflection. I have a picture of Winston Churchill in my study -- in old age -- taken from the back -- as he was sitting, quietly looking at a pond and a lovely bit of English landscape. Looking at that picutre one knows that a great mind was at work in that moment doing a very important piece of thinking. I was delighted to learn that Abraham Lincoln spent a lot of time "wasting time" according to our standards. He was considered lazy while in office. An opponent in one election campaign called him a"study in inertia". He took a two hour nap every afternoon. Or he spent an equivalent amount of time rocking on the porch of the White House watching the horses graze on the lawn.

In contrast, Ulysses S. Grant, usually regarded as one of our least effective chief executives, was one of the busiest. A tireless worker, he drove himself and those around him, mercilessly. And more recently, I think one of the more attractive photographs of President Ford portrayed him standing quietly, silhouetted against the windows of the Oval Office, obviously deep in thought.

We need a time and place for aloneness. Not all the time -- not even very much of the time. I am not advocating a return to monasticism. There is a time for everything: the preacher in Ecclesiastes identified "balance" as the ideal -- "a time to keep silence and a time to speak". And it's interesting that in the 6th chapter of Mark the disciples never made it to that lonely place. A clamoring crowd of hungry people touched the compassion of our Lord, and "resting a while in a quiet place" was temporarily set aside while the people were fed.

But he did say it, and we must assume, that there were other times and other places.

For you and for me -- regular times of quiet reflection are a necessity. And yet, as you know, that is easier said than done. In the first place we live in a culture that is very suspicious of idleness, and as an expression of that suspicion has an obsession with busyness. It doesn't matter what you are doing so long as you are busy at it. It's even more socially respectable to be pushed, harried, late and always running. I have professional colleagues who have never said one word to me over the years that did not include a brief recitation of how many meetings they were attending, how much they had to do, how terribly busy they were. In fact, there is a brand new parlor game played vigorously by men of the cloth called ("I'm busier than you".) I fall into that trap, even though I have vowed not to. People have said to me, many more times than I care to contemplate, ("I wanted to call you, but you're so busy".) And I want to say clearly, today -- as I begin my ministry among you -- that I regard that as a serious indictment of me -- and of you when you say it -- and of our whole neurotic culture that has forced us into that posturing. We are not that busy: you are the business of the pastors of this church: please call on us.

There is probably no greater difference between our culture and others than at this point. A good friend of mine was studying in Europe and decided to spend several weeks in an Italian monastery to add to his experience of the Church. He worked in the fields, prayed, chanted, kept the monastic discipline: and then one morning he was informed that it was time for a retreat. He had visions of volley ball, hiking, swimming. Instead he was given a bottle of water, some bread and olives, taken to a cave and told to remain there in meditation for 24 hours. He confesses now that it was the most difficult and by far, the longest 24 hours in his life.

A typical, active, busy American - his periods of meditation had been snatched on airplanes, on which doing the co-

My family and I experienced that difference also during our summer in Scotland last year. I was to be the pastor of a small Highland Parish: and anxious to let the entire village know that I was serious about my ecclesiastical responsibilities, I got up early on that first morning to walk into town for tea and to begin meeting people. At 8:00 A.M. I found nothing -- no cars -- no people -- no shops open: just a few sheep sleeping on the side walks. Again at 8·30 -- nothing. We learned subsequently that school doesn't begin until 9:00. Management people at the Aluminum Foundry began also at 9:00 -- took a full hour for dinner -- a fact I found incredible in light of the typical American executive who is behind his desk at 7:30 and who won't return home for 12 hours.

Life was considerably slower that our pace ..

And so we slowed down a bit -- but we found it very difficult. As Americans, we are obsessed with busyness, accomplishment, production. And while, in one sense, our obsession serves us well -- in terms of enabling us to be a rich and powerful nation, we are -- I am convinced -- paying for it dearly. We are paying for it in terms of wealth without charity, power without wisdom, efficiency without morality. We are paying for it in terms of lives burnt out at 40:- ulcers and nervous breakdowns.

We need to heed well our Lord's advice. But it is not easy for reasons that are cultural, but for other reasons as well. In moments of solitude and reflection there is no way to avoid thinking: remembering our goals, our dreams, our failures, and plans. There is no way to avoid feeling our feelings, and confronting, in a very particular way, the person we have become.

In his little manual of Christian Fellowship, LIFE TOGETHER, Dietrich Bonhoeffer devoted an entire chapter to "The Day Alone". In it he observed, "Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people... .The person who comes into the community because he is running from himself is really not

seeking community at all, but only distraction....." (P.76). Busyness -- activity -- can become the way we avoid confronting ourselves, spiritually and psychologically a most unhealthy device.

In his recent book, "THE SEDUCTION OF THE SPIRIT" Harvey Cox describes his efforts to learn how to be quiet, to meditate, to listen to himself. He observes: "We are so relentlessly pounded today by messages and stimuli from without that we need support from any source whatever to learn again to listen to what comes from within....Learning to meditate is like lowering the volume on an ear-blasting stereo: it makes us more capable of hearing ourselves and one another. Nothing could be more important". (P.58).

In terms of relationships, we are discovering that we must learn to be alone, before we can be together. We are learning the importance of autonomy -- an individual's ability to stand alone, to be his own person. We are learning that marriages based on need are not likely to be good marriages. Rainer Maria Rilke put it this way:

"Once the ~~relegation~~ realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other against the sky".

And the near-Eastern mystic, Gibran; "Let there be spaces in your togetherness, and let the winds of the leaves dance between you....."

After a period of time in which family togetherness was very much in style, and parents felt inadequate if they ~~did~~ were not ~~provide scheduled~~ programming structured activities for their children every waking hour, we are learning again the necessity of aloneness.

We know now that sensitive families provide time and space for each person to be alone. Mother and Father need time to be alone together, and if they are wise they will find a way to take it. Each of them, in addition, needs solitude. Children simply need to be left alone periodically to do their own thinking and reflecting and becoming.

I am always surprised, when I take time to be alone at what I can hear -- from within and without. There are birds singing that you have not yet heard. And more importantly, there are people -- people who need you to be you -- to listen; to help and support and heal by your willingness to be quiet.

A philosopher once observed that it is a rare man who can spend a full minute in lonely silence without thinking about God. Perhaps. And perhaps the reason we avoid the silent experience of meditation is that it opens instead for us the door into what St. John of the Cross called: "the dark night of the soul"; where we feel confused and empty; where the best we have is a thirst for certitude, a need for God.

And yet, it is in that darkness that God will come. Again Bonhoeffer has said it plainly and eloquently:

"The time of meditation does not let us down into the void and abyss of loneliness; it lets us be alone with the word... Often we are so burdened and overwhelmed with other thoughts, images and concerns that it may take a long time before God's word has swept all else aside and come through. But it will surely come, just as surely as God himself has come to men and will come again". (P.81-82).

You and I are called to be followers of Jesus Christ: we are called to do our following in a busy world that allows little time for aloneness and a life-style that is not often quiet. We are called to be disciples within the context of the busy schedules we will keep this fall: schedules that can fill every hour and drain us -- physically, emotionally, spiritually.

Take time: make time for the waters of your spirit to flow deeply: time in which the Spirit of God can speak to your spirit. "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place".

Amen

Father: We know you are present even among the busy noises of life. Grant us, as we begin our life again, a new sensitivity to your presence -- your voice. We have time, Father: come -- in the still, small voice of calm: Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

September 1, 1974

Almighty God, men have called you by many names down across the centuries: and as we worship you in our time we are the inheritors of their thinking - their ideas - their words. We are grateful for them, and we are aware that we do not stand here alone, but together - in a great company of saints that includes us - and countless others of all nations and classes and stations and ages. Help us to understand that as we call you father. Open us to that brotherhood implied as we affirm your fatherhood. Help us also to understand the depths of intimacy implied in that name. For it means that you know us; you know our names: you care for us and about us as we care about our children: it means you hurt when we hurt, and your joy mingles with our own. It means you love us enough to set us free, but that never in our lives do you abandon us.

As we pray, our father, help us to be honest. Give us confidence to share with you our deepest concerns: our guilt - our sense of inadequacy - our hopes + dreams - our plans - our victories and joys. For loving fathers care about these things - and your love for us is perfect.

Together, we come before you; ~~different~~ individuals with different concerns - but in these moments - one body - Hear us. ~~Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen~~ our father.

On this week-end that celebrates the virtue of hard work, we are reminded of the ways we depend on the labors of others. And so, our father - aware of our dependency, we give thanks for and pray for all those whose services to us are usually unrecognized - but without which we could not live: for farmers + shippers + food processors: for sanitation workers + construction laborers: for repairmen - and policemen + firemen: for industrial workers and tradesmen. For all those who plant + harvest, build + maintain - we give you thanks.

Our father, we are grateful for what we have: and yet we are painfully aware that there are many, near and far, who do not share our comfort + affluence. We pray for them - for migrant families who do our hardest work and remain poor. for unemployed men + women who would work but cannot: for people caught in the deadly cycle of poverty, unemployment + welfare. - Father, you are a God of justice. Judge us when we judge others. Keep us honest about our own feelings, humbly grateful for our affluence and aware of our dependence on others - and most of all, compassionate toward those less fortunate than we.

Our father, as one season ends + another begins, we look back with gratitude on the experiences of summer: and we look forward with hope + enthusiasm to the activities of fall. We pray for Universities, Colleges + schools: we pray for educators and we commend to your care students of all ages. We pray, father, for those who are traveling on this weekend - for those of our number who are sick or lonely or depressed. Bless them with your compassion and love.

Almighty and Eternal God, we ~~are~~ are filled with hope for our nation, and we pray your special blessing upon our government, the President and his family, and upon all those who serve in public office. You have called us to live as your people in exciting times: help us to be equal to our tasks.

Hear our prayers: hear the prayers that remain unspoken in our hearts: for we hold them up in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord + Saviour. Amen